

History in the making

The John Mansfield Thomson Archive at the University of Waikato



Martin Lodge and Philippa Ulenberg working in the John M Thomson Archive

BY MARTIN LODGE & PHILLIPPA ULENBERG

THE EMINENT New Zealand music historian and writer, the late John Mansfield Thomson, was both a prolific writer and a lifelong collector—of books, manuscripts, art works and musical ephemera. At the time of his death in 1999, Thomson had put in order and deposited with the New Zealand Music Archive in the Turnbull Library about half of his personal papers. These have already proved a significant resource for researchers from several disciplines.

Following Thomson's sudden death, his family donated the rest of his literary remains to the University of Waikato where Thomson had been a research fellow in the Music Department for several years. Martin Lodge, a staff member of the Music Department, is Thomson's literary executor.

Prior to 2007 a number of researchers had attempted to use this valuable and important resource held at the University of Waikato, but experienced difficulties because the papers were in a haphazard state of organisation. The folders had been placed within boxes when Thomson's house in Wellington was cleared for sale. These boxes, for the most part, had little in the way of meaningful identification.

To remedy this and make the papers more useful, an application for a Summer Research Scholarship was lodged with the University of Waikato in 2007. The application was successful, being awarded to graduate music student Philippa Ulenberg, who was paid to work on the materials from November 2007 through to February 2008. The supervisor was Martin Lodge. The objective of the Summer Research Scholarship was to index, organise, briefly describe and prepare the 108 boxes of papers and other materials for archiving.

Ulenberg worked with the project supervisor, and with librarian Kathryn Parsons, who advised on correct archival procedures. The Turnbull Library was approached for assistance, and it was particularly helpful to have specific expert advice from Dr Stephen Hamilton, a cultural historian and former Turnbull Library archivist who had recently relocated to Hamilton.

The working method involved going through all the materials in the 108 cartons to document the contents. Wherever Thomson's own original order was evident, the papers were described and prepared in such a manner that the original order was maintained. However, many of the folders had been placed in boxes randomly by house removal staff, and so it made sense to impose some new arrangement on these for archival purposes. Where Thomson had named boxes of folders, his box labels remain the same in the archive. Likewise, where the folders had assigned titles by him, these remain the same. Most of the folders were labelled by their creator, whereas the boxes frequently had little to properly identify the contents.

The most important outcome of the Summer Research Scholarship work was the generation of an index that gives the names of the boxes, with a brief description of the contents of the folders within. Folder names are listed after the description. Significant contents (such as subject-related correspondence, press-cuttings and photos) have been noted for each folder. A printout of the index is available on request from the University of Waikato Music Department and also will be mounted on the Department's web site.

In preparing the collection for archiving, the boxes of folders and papers were examined physically. Steel paper-clips and staples were removed and replaced with plastic-coated clips. Faxes and fragile documents were photocopied for preservation. Fragile documents have been wrapped in acid-free paper. A great many photographs also have been wrapped in acid-free paper—these were prioritised by age and importance, as time did not permit this treatment of them all. Dubbing of open reel and cassette tape sound recordings into digital format is proceeding gradually as Music Department resources permit.

In the time given for the project, it was never going to be feasible to describe the contents of every folder in detail, but that certainly would be desirable at a later date. The boxes labelled 'Autobiographical' are of significant interest to researchers, and these have been described at length, as far as time allowed. A collection of early New Zealand music scores, some original and some photocopied, has been detailed. Again, this is the sort of material that researchers are likely to want access to. Numerous letters to and from a diverse range of people are in the collection, including composers such as Douglas Lilburn and Edwin Carr. Drafts and working papers of many of Thomson's books, articles, speeches and other presentations are in the collection, but there are also various unexpected treasures, such as typed copies of letters by Katherine Mansfield, postcards from Peter Pears, and a hand-written paper on the *Viola Alta* by Michael Balling. The earliest material in the collection dates from the sixteenth century, the latest from 1999.

The John Mansfield Thomson Papers archive at the University of Waikato is now usefully organised and clearly labelled, and will be a significant resource for researchers into New Zealand music and cultural history. While the collection has a primary orientation towards music, Thomson's interests were inclusive of dance, fine arts, drama, and literature and there is important material that would be of interest to researchers in these areas. The papers form a literary counterpart to the magnificent Thomson Collection of musical prints and engravings held on long-term loan from the Thomson family by the University of Waikato in collaboration with the Waikato Museum of Art and History. ■